"OUR BETTERS" AS CONSIDERED BY SIR HERBERT TREE

A Medley of "Considered Indiscretions" Relating to Stations in Life by the Famous English Actor-Manager.

Under the title of "Thoughts and Afterthoughts" Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree has just issued a very entertaining volume of essays and jottings by himself through the press of Cassell and Company. His dedication is original. It reads: "To mine enemy I dedicate the faults of this book. To my friend I dedicate what virtue it may have, hoping thus to give pleasure to both." The chapter entitled "Our Betters, a Medley of Considered Indiscretions," is in Sir Herbert's best style. A large part of the chapter is given herewith.

By HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE.

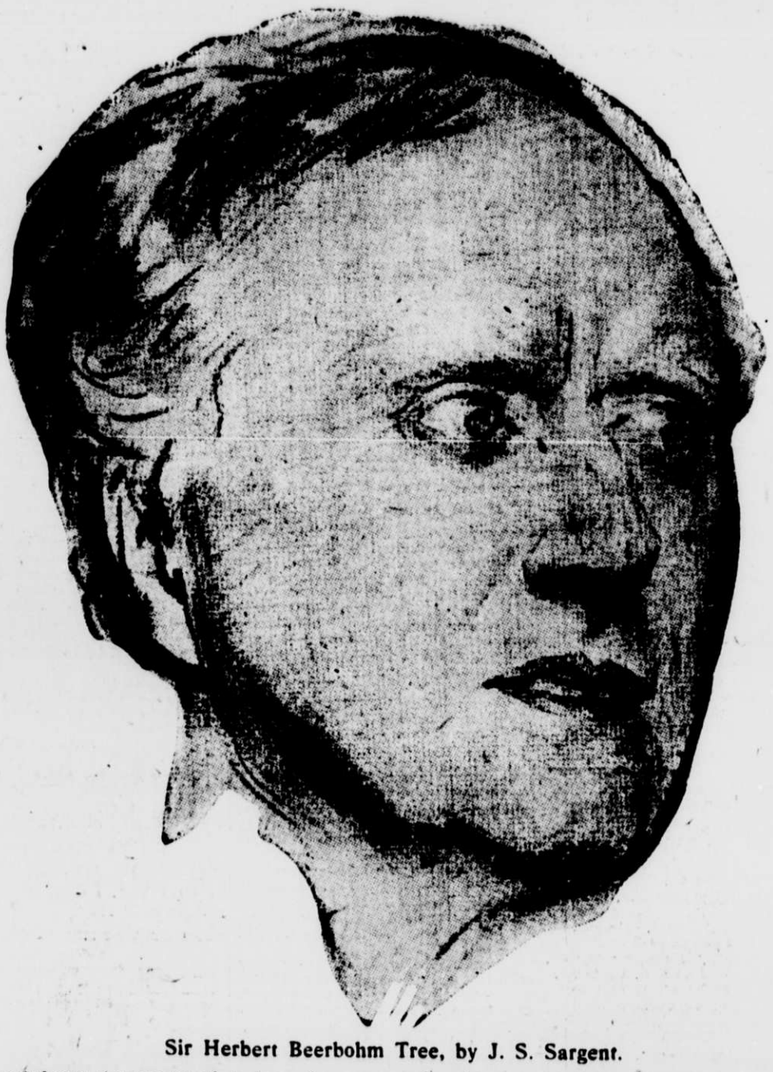
IT might easily be imagined that I intend to flatter the great, to admonish the little, to uphold the ethics of vested interests and to make "whatever is, is right" the burden of my essay.

I have no such intention. There is no more mischievous doctrine than that implied in the phrase "Our Betters" as commonly used. There is no more pitiable creed than that summed up in the old rhyme, spoken with fervor by thousands of lips and sung in unison by thousands of hearts:

God bless the squire and his relations,
And keep us in our proper stations.

Gloss it over with good manners or what we may, this fact remains every man is to himself the most important thing on earth, and the first thing he requires is self-respect, that he may the better respect others.

The distinction which is born of self-respect is often met in the peasant, the man who is nearest to nature. To create this sense is the first duty of the state. The care of the individual is the safeguard of the community; the assertion of the individual conscience over the conglomerate law of force is the triumph of free mind over the tyranny of matter.



Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, by J. S. Sargent.

The world is undergoing a sea change; the old landmarks are being swept away, the barbed wire fences which separated the classes are being relegated to the limbo of the human scrap heap. As in our time science has progressed with giant strides—I mean the science appertaining to tangible things, the science of bodies—so I believe we are on the threshold of a spiritual science, the science of a higher sociology. Its premonitory vibrations are felt all over the world. Wherever we put our ears to the ground we hear a tiny tapping at the earth's crust; it is the upspringing of a new social creed; it is the call of a new religion; it is the intellectual enfranchisement of mankind.

Vaguely we all apprehend it, but we are slow to give it articulate utterance. I suppose that most of us when we are young—I mean those who think and feel—are by nature rebels. It is only in middle life that we learn to toe the line of expediency, the line of least resistance. We fall into step with those whom we call Our Betters—those who are in power. We are creatures of habit in mind as well as in body; and when we are old (some are born old) we cast aside the unworldly wisdom which our ethical instinct taught us and put on the worldly wisdom of vested interests. We no longer think and feel for ourselves; we cease to be individuals, we are swallowed up in and become part of a system; we adopt the machine made social laws of Our Betters. It is to our advantage. We are on the make. "Take what you can, give what you must" is the motto of the utilitarian.

This worldly wisdom is forced upon us in many ways: by the pinch of poverty, by the greater ease with which it enables us to climb the greasy pole of fame, by the avoidance of friction in our relations with our fellow men and by that sympathetic and unconscious absorption of the prevailing ideas that surround us—the cult of "Good Form." We are creatures of habit inwardly and outwardly.

On that symbol of respectability, the frock coat, we wear two buttons at the back, though why few of us know. A reverence for buttons is indeed one of the most curious attributes of our common humanity. In the same way we wear the habit of our minds ready made, buttons and all. Gentility is our watchword; we chorus the common hymn of respectability.

I remember Swinburne the poet telling me with a tinge of sadness of his own evolution. He and William Morris were friends in youth. "At that time," said he, "William Morris was a Tory of the bluest blood, while I was a red hot Republican. Now," he sighed, "Morris addresses socialist mobs in Trafalgar square, and I write patriotic odes for the St. James Gazette." That is the

It seems to me that the rarest thing in humanity is independence of mind, the faculty of thinking and acting for oneself; the power to fulfil oneself at all costs.

To be oneself is the greatest luxury in the world, and I am bound to say it is the most expensive.

If we may regard tact as one of the minor virtues, let us not despise the valor of indiscretion, for to be indiscreet with discretion, to be gay without being flippant, to be serious without being earnest, is not this the philosophy of life?

It is this independence of mind which is my theme. It is easy to have the courage of other people's opinions; to have the courage of one's own instinct is the badge of the few. To be content to be in the minority in past times was to dwell in the shadow of palaces and in the shade of prisons.

But there is still injustice in the world; we have, thank heaven, still the luxury of scorn. Out of our large scorn we weave our little epigrams:

The rain it raineth every day
Upon the just and unjust fellow,
But chiefly on the just, because
The unjust has the just's umbrellow.

But the minority of to-day is often the majority of to-morrow, as the majority of to-day is often the minority of to-morrow! (Every truth has its paradox.)

One should never hazard until one has cogged the dice of fate. The native alcohol of a sanguine temperament is apt to lead one into strange quagmires.

A little mouse strayed into a wine cellar. Happening to step into a small puddle of whiskey he licked his paw. "H'm! Rather nice that!" So he dipped in another paw; then all four paws; finally he lay down and rolled himself in the spirit, had a good lick all over, and felt most royally elated. Then staggering to the head of the staircase, leaping up two steps at a time, he yelled out: "Where is that damned cat that chased me yesterday?"

It is only by combination that weak units make themselves strong. One of these days the mice may set up a trade union—and then? Well, I suppose they will have to hire a terrier to espouse their cause!

However, my theme is not mice, but men. Union among men is one of the burning questions of the hour, and here I may allow myself the indiscretion of touching upon the great question of trade unionism, upon which I can speak with some little experience.

I suppose that every new movement, if successful, brings in its train a certain amount of tyranny. "In righting wrong, we sometimes wrong the right." The great struggle between capital and labor which is now going on is but the result of education. Education has placed a weapon in the hands of the democracy. It is a two edged weapon, and its right use can only be taught by a yet greater, a higher education. Liberty gives birth to new tyrannies, and there can be no doubt that a certain amount of injustice must accompany all great reforms. So it is that the individual may for the time being suffer from the tyranny of labor. But in the long run the individual will assert himself—the freedom of the individual to fulfil himself is the strength of the State. Each must be free to work out his own economic salvation. The liberty which cripples the efforts of the fittest is but another form of tyranny, the tyranny of the weak over the strong. We have the new liberty, for instance, which dictates compulsory [illegible] on Thursdays, in order that we may have the vitality to rest from Saturday to Monday.

When I speak of a higher education I do not mean the useless, outworn education which we wear as the superfluous buttons on our coattails, but an education which shall be largely philosophical, which shall teach the laws of health, of happiness and of self-esteem of which modesty is the natural outcome, the kind of education that Marcus Aurelius suggested in his "Reflections."

I venture to think that much of the education we inherit from our forefathers is unsuitable to the conditions of the present time. In this higher education we must begin at the beginning; we must begin with the children. If children were taught a doggerel with a tune which should embody the simple laws of health, the rudimentary laws of happiness, they would never forget them all their lives; but these things are taken for granted. When they are young, boys are taught to look down upon other nations. They are taught to be jingoes. Were they taught in their infancy a world patriotism there would be fewer wars. I have no doubt that there has been of late years a great advance in this respect, but I remember a little incident that looms out of my first visit to America. It was at Chicago, and I was visiting at the house of highly cultured people. Their little boy of 8 years old came in from his history lesson. "Are you an Englishman?" he asked. It was useless to deny it, for my accent betrayed me. "I am," I blurted. At this he struck me with his little fist. "Well, take that," he said, "for upsetting the tea."

It is sad to think that we often learn too late by bitter experience what we might have learned as children, when habits are quickly acquired.

Were we taught in our youth that happiness does not depend upon riches, nor honor upon honors, that our greatest pride should be to fulfil ourselves instead of aping "Our Betters," there would be less unhappiness in life. We learn wisdom only by our failures. Philosophy is a filly got by Common Sense out of Misfortune. How little wisdom, how little understanding of the real essentials of life, do we often find in those who grow prematurely old and cynical in the pursuit of a decorative but not always useful university career! Their point of view is narrowed; they have lost their individuality; they have imbibed from their "Betters" ideas of good form which they never shake off; they have lost their power to "do."

Take, for instance, the son of a manufacturer who by his own effort has built up a great business. The father sends his son to the university, as "Our Betters" do. What often happens is that the son returns to his home unfitted to carry on the work which his father's energy initiated. And what has he got in return? The right to wear a colored ribbon round his straw hat! Those precious years between 18 and 24 have been wasted; those precious years in which he should have passed many a milestone on the road of life. He emerges from the university barren of initiative; he is no longer an individual; he is but a devotee of good form. The factory over which he should have presided is run by a salaried manager; the foreigner outstrips him in the competition; he has not the pride in that which his father made, in that which made his father. He is a victim to "Our Betters." But he has become a gentleman.

And what is a gentleman? A gentleman is one who does not care a button whether he is one or not. It has always seemed to me that the greatest men I have met in life have been distinguished by a simplicity and a naturalness, the counterpart of which one only finds in peasants.

I remember the thing which struck me most when I first visited the House of Lords was the extraordinarily careless manner in which the peers were attired. They appeared to be a procession of savants and market gardeners, with a sprinkling of "bucks." The late Lord Salisbury looked like a Viking who had casually strayed into Conduit street. By the by, it is recorded of that great statesman that on one state occasion he wore the Order of the Garter on the wrong shoulder—a truly lovable touch in a great man. But, of course, we cannot become great by wearing our garters on the wrong leg, any more than we can become geniuses by brushing our hats the wrong way.

How easy it is to be a genius until one has done something! Everybody is a potential genius until he has tried to do something in the world. Woe be to him who does something, for to be understood is to be found out.

As soon as you have done something the noble army of log rollers who were at your back will be facing you, fiery pen in hand, and then, what an awakening! The process of acquiring a swelled head is a most fascinating and pleasant state. It is only the subsequent shrinkage which hurts. I know these little coteries. I am acquainted with their jargon. They too have their little protective trade unions which seek by their intrigues to "down the tools" of the workman who "does." To be peculiar, to be original, is the vain endeavor of their existence. This striving after originality is the greatest convention in the world. The really strong man is unconscious of his originality; he does what he does because he must. We only do well what we cannot help doing.

The other day I found myself in the Paris Salon looking upon the display of Post-Impressionist or Futurist and Cubist pictures.

I am only too ready to appreciate any new phase of art, so long as it is "truly new" or "newly true"; but I am bound to say that this latest development of the new art seems to me frankly insincere, where it is not obviously unhealthy.

After a time I turned from the pictures to watch the faces of the spectators, and while in some cases the look was that of humorous tolerance, it was mostly one of set bewilderment. The public went about silently, as though wandering among the inmates of a madhouse. The word of critical wisdom was of course uttered by a child. A boy of 7 years old stood before a picture and, clapping his hands, turned to his mother and said, "Oh, mamma, I have never seen a green dog before!"

We often bear a great tragedy, a great sorrow, more calmly than we do the minor annoyances of life—fleas are more disconcerting than elephants. A friend of mine told me that whenever he was sorely troubled about a loss on the Stock Exchange or the non-attainment of a peerage he threw open his window, walked out into the garden, looked at the stars, and laughed—lit his pipe—and was at peace with the world. So the late Lord Tennyson, when staying at a country house where the neighboring luminaries of the county had been invited to meet him, was asked by his host after dinner whether he would like to look at the stars. The great poet took up the telescope, and, forgetting himself and others, gazed for twenty minutes at the wonders of the heavens. "Well, what do you think, Mr. Tennyson?" inquired his host. "I don't think much of our county families," replied Tennyson. In moments such as these, when we contemplate the vast solemnities of creation, the sociological amenities of life are apt to take their due perspective.

There are many kinds of snobbery—there is the snobbery of riches; there is the snobbery of power, the snobbery of aristocracy (though I am bound to say that so far as my observation goes the class which is least tainted with this failing is the aristocracy). There is the snobbery of socialism, there is the snobbery of dogma and there is the snobbery of culture—the snobbery of what Americans call the "highbrows"—perhaps the most fearsome snobbery of all. Alas, not all people who are gifted with intellect have the saving grace of intelligence; they lack that tolerance which is characteristic of all great and noble minds. Kindness is the crowning triumph. There is nothing meaner than the contempt of the greatly endowed for those less favored than themselves. There is nothing finer than modesty in the great, for that modesty implies a divine humor.

There is one direction in which it seems to me the imitation of Our Betters is most lamentable, and that is in the pronunciation of the English language. And here, of course, the stage can fulfil a useful mission in preserving the vigor and the breadth of Shakespeare's tongue; indeed, it is difficult to be lackadaisical in speaking his virile verse.

Let us consider the way the language is spoken by the poorer classes. The Cockney accent has had many vicissitudes; it has undergone great changes in our time. Take the case of Dickens. We know that Mr. Weller was very shaky as to his w's: "Spell it with a 'wee,' Sammy." This particular vulgarism has quite gone out of abuse.

The dropping of the "h" will no doubt be a thing of the past in the next generation, as it is regarded as vulgar in the present. Again the dropping of the "g" is a vulgarity in persons of the lower classes, as it is a sign of smartness in Our Betters.

The preservation of the strength of the English language is indeed all important. The very latest Cockney accent is what I may call of the order "genteel." The vowels are squeezed almost out of recognition. "Home" becomes "hôme"; "time" becomes "taime"; "town" becomes "teouwn"; "girl" becomes "giairl." It seems to me that the children are taught in the schools this terrible jargon of gentility to which the vigorous vulgarity of the early Victorian Cockney was infinitely preferable. The imitation of Our Betters is once more to be deprecated. There is nothing so terrible as "refainement."

I once heard an Englishman who in spite of a total ignorance of foreign languages when travelling abroad always contrived to get what he wanted by a very simple expedient. He had just returned from a visit to Germany. "How did you manage to get on?" asked a friend. "Famously," he replied. 'But you don't know one word of German," said the other. "I only know one word of German, and that's French: 'Pardong.' Whenever I wanted to go anywhere or to obtain anything I simply say 'Pardong.' No one can say me nay, for I shouldn't understand their language. So I help myself."

Self-help is the first law of possession. If one wants anything done one should always do it oneself—it saves so much waste of time in blaming others if things go wrong. Take what you want, but take it gracefully—then apologize for having it, but keep it all the same, and then put a sentry over it. This has answered very well in our colonial policy. But the reason why England has kept her colonies is that she has not only the genius of "give and take"; she has the yet greater genius to "take and give"—the genius of a sympathetic understanding of alien races. Her tyranny is tempered by humanity.

A general disarmament is the ideal toward which humanity is striving all over the world. But pride and prejudice and greed are still mighty forces, and it is only by the spread of the higher education that the spiritual development of mankind can be insured by the adoption of Christ's doctrines, which, alas! go to the wall in all Christian countries at the bidding of expediency. Blood is thicker than water, but gold is thicker than blood. As Shakespeare is the most modern of writers, so is Christ the most modern of reformers; indeed, He is a little in advance of our time; His principles are still taboo, and if uttered by a modern statesman would be denounced as "bad form." Is not every reformer regarded as "no gentleman" until his propaganda has become the law of the land?

I know a multi-millionaire who, having been baptized late in life, forsook Christianity. We had been having a somewhat heated discussion on social questions. We were in a picture gallery, and suddenly stood before a great picture of Christ. "Socialist!" the multi-millionaire cried as he left the building.

We often hear it said that war is a necessary evil, that war keeps the race strong, that war will not cease while human nature lasts. But is this so? What about the Jews, who are perhaps the most dominant race in the world to-day? Have they needed wars to keep them strong? Have their domestic virtues needed the stimulus of bloodshed? Have their acquisitive vices needed it? Has the flower of the Jewish race been destroyed on the battlefield? The Jews have devoted themselves for many centuries to commerce and to the arts of peace. Certainly we artists have reason to be grateful to the Jews; for I dread to think what would become of the art of this country were it not for the encouragement and support it receives at the hands of the Jewish community.

We have looked upon the wonderful strides which science has made in the past fifty years—it may be that in the next half century mankind will see a revolution which shall bring another happiness, the happiness which is derived from the exercise of the most humanizing of all the influences—I mean that which is bestowed by art.

Our respect for others is in proportion to our respect for ourselves—and to be true to himself, that is man's best endeavor; for, as Shakespeare says, and he says everything that can be said on any conceivable subject better than any other could say it, "To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

AFTERTHOUGHT.

If in the foregoing excursions I have given utterance to an occasional truth, as the blind hen picks up a corn, I can only plead that they were written when wandering alone under the pine trees, pondering some problems of life; and the scent of the pine trees had got into my brain. I listened to what they said, and took it down in shorthand. And the message that their boughs whispered to me was this:

The best thing a man can do is to be himself, in spite of all inconveniences; and in his little walk through life to tell the truth according to himself; to be afraid of no man but himself; to respect the laws but not to cringe to them; to be himself in spite of the opinion of the multitude, and to acknowledge no higher court of appeal than that of his own conscience; for he who can look unflinchingly in the mirror of his soul laughs when his effigy is burned in the market place.

"Is that so?" I asked.

And the pine trees murmured, "Yes. Our only Betters are ourselves."